The Lord's Prayer

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"Hallowed be thy name"

Scripture

Matthew 6:5–13 and Luke 11:1–4 The two versions of the Lord's Prayer taught by Jesus to his disciples.

Prayer

Our Father, teach us to pray the prayer Jesus gave to the disciples so long ago. Enable us to pray it with new understanding of what we are asking you to do and with fresh sensitivity to the implications of these requests for our lives, the life of the church, and the life of the world, should our requests be granted. Deliver us from a faithless familiarity with the words we have recited so many times as well as from a dismissal of them because they are strange and unfamiliar. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Introduction

The story is told of the Scottish boy who was being examined for confirmation. "Laddie," the minister asked, "do you understand the catechism?" "Aye, Domine," he replied, "I understand every word of it, and it dinna mean a thing."

How can we understand every word of a text and yet claim that it doesn't mean anything? Interpretation theorists like Paul Ricoeur or E. D. Hirsch Jr. would say the boy comprehended the *sense* of the catechism (what it says) but had no interest in its *reference* (how it says it) and therefore could not discern in it any *significance* for his life (the "So what?" question).

Possibly some have the same problem with the Lord's Prayer. Recorded in the Gospels of Matthew (6:9–13) and Luke (11:2–4), it has been on the lips of believers (usually in the Matthean version) since Jesus taught his disciples to say when they pray.

> Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.
> Thy kingdom come.
> Thy will be done, in earth as it is in heaven.

> Give us this day our daily bread.
> And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.
> And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
> —Matthew 6:9–13 (KJV)

Every Sunday these words are recited by millions of Christians (often from memory) in diverse languages, liturgies, and denominations at worship around the world. It is the one prayer of the whole church.

But what do these words mean to us? In what sense is "Father" God's name? What is the "kingdom" of God about? What are the "bread" we need daily, the "debts" requiring forgiveness, and the "evil" that enslaves? Moreover, does any of this make a difference in our lives? Given our Lord's warning against "empty phrases" in prayer (Matthew 6:7), the Lord's Prayer merits a serious effort to understand it by those who say it.

This study addresses these questions in the light of New Testament scholarship and the Reformed theological tradition. This session focuses on the prayer's address to God (which raises the God-language issue) and the first of its six petitions.

"Our Father"

Jesus taught his disciples to preface prayer by saying, "Our Father, which art in heaven." Luke has simply "Father," a rendering of the Greek *patér,* which translates the Aramaic *abba*—a homey, family term used by Jewish children to address their human father in a filial bond of affection and respect. This is how Jesus addressed God. In his prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night of his arrest, he cried, "Abba, Father" (Mark 14:36). In this he was unique. First-century Jewish prayers often addressed God formally as "Father," but the word *abba* implies an intimacy and a familiarity with God expressed only by Jesus. At his invitation, the word was adopted by his disciples and eventually even non-Aramaic-speaking Christians (cf., Romans 8:15; Galatians 4:6).

The Gospels attest that "Father" was Jesus' *name* for God. A concordance confirms this by the number of times it attributes the term to him. More importantly, Jesus frequently referred to God as "my Father" (Matthew 7:21; 10:32, 33; 12:50; 16:17 and passim; Luke 22:29; 24:49), indicating thereby his sense of a personal relationship with God. Luke attributes this awareness to Jesus as early as his childhood visit to the temple with his parents: "Did you

not know that I must be in my Father's house?" (2:49). But this was no childlike anthropomorphizing of God based on his experience of a kindly Joseph at home. His adult testimony was that his awareness of God as his "Father" was grounded in God's self-revelation:

> All things have been handed over to me by my Father;
> and no one knows the Son except the Father,
> and no one knows the Father except the Son
> and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.
> —Matthew 11:27; Luke 10:22

To know Jesus as "the Son" is to know God as "the Father" of the Son. When Peter confessed, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God," Jesus replied, "Blessed are you Simon-bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 16:16–17). This emphasis on God's self-revelation to us, God's coming to us first, has long been a staple of Reformed theology. "He is 'God toward us,'" explains German theologian Otto Weber, "but not 'God according to us.'"[1]

Jesus not only spoke of God as "my Father," however. He also spoke to his disciples of "your Father" (Matthew 5:16, 45, 48; 6:1, 4, 8, 15; 7:11; 10:20, 29; Luke 6:36; 12:32). It is a relationship he shares with them, thus the plural possessive pronoun in the address to God—"our Father." Put simply, Jesus invites the disciples (and us) into the same relationship with the "Father" that he himself knows and enjoys. When we accept that invitation, we discover we are part of a very large family of faith. This is to say that Christian prayer is always personal but never individual.

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"Which art in heaven"

God "our Father" is further identified as the One "in heaven," in distinction from earthly fathers. *Heaven* refers to the sky, which is up from and above the earth. What this signals is not that God is distant from us, located in some inaccessible place "up there" in outer space, but that God transcends the creation and is thus Other than the

1. Otto Weber, *Foundations of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1981), I, p. 401.

universe in which we live. Put simply, it tells us that our heavenly Father is *God*. Transcendence necessarily entails difference but not distance. God is always both over us and near us. What better way to express this insight in prescientific times than by pointing to the sky—away from the familiar and well-known?

But if God is wholly Other than creation, including all its human cultures and languages, how is it possible to think of or speak to God in such earthly terms as "our Father"? The answer is by figurative language based on analogy, such as simile and metaphor. Some consider such tropes as mere rhetorical flourishes that tell us nothing about reality. Oxford professor G. B. Caird maintains, however, that this is to confuse the real with the literal. He illustrates his point by telling of the school girl who wrote in an essay, "Our rector is literally the father of every boy and girl in the village." The reality she attested to was a clergyman known to his parishioners as "Father," he explains. But the type of language appropriate to that reality is metaphorical and not literal.[2] A metaphor is the use of a literal term in a nonliteral sense based on a limited point of comparison between the two. Caird warns that metaphors break down when they are identified with the wrong point of comparison or taken to be similar to the literal sense in every respect.[3] Thus the priest was really the "Father" of every boy and girl in the village in a pastoral sense only. But he was nonetheless *really* their pastor. The same applies to God as "our Father." God *is* our Father, but not in every literal sense of the word.

For Jesus, this metaphorical sense has priority over the literal understanding of human fatherhood. He taught his disciples to "call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven" (Matthew 23:9). The word *abba* was also used in Jesus' time to show respect for older men of distinction, and the context of this verse suggests that *father* has a titular sense and refers not to biological sires but to those who crave deference and respect. Jesus denies them that honor because the term has been redefined by the God who alone is worthy of the title. The point is that as God transcends the world, so the word *Father* now transcends our

As God transcends the world, so the word Father *now transcends our experience of fatherhood.*

2. See G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980), p. 131.

3. Ibid., p. 145.

experience of fatherhood, even when represented by "the best dad in the world." When used metaphorically for God, *Father* is qualitatively more than its literal equivalent.

"Hallowed be thy name"

In biblical times a name was more than a label. It disclosed the nature of the one who bore it. Significantly, the first petition of the Lord's Prayer is that God's (revealed) name be hallowed. The verb in Greek, which means "be honored as holy," is in the passive voice (often called the "divine passive" when speaking of God), indicating that we are calling on God to honor his name by being Father to us.

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Sadly but understandably, the human honoring of God's name meets resistance today from some Christians out of concern for gender equality and in opposition to social structures oppressive to women. Feminist believers object to any theological language that seems to sanction patriarchy by grounding it in divinity. If all fathers are male and God is a father, the logic goes, then God is male and men are by creation more godlike than women and thus privileged over them. No doubt the name *Father* has been used and abused in this way.

But this is theologically erroneous. For sexuality, with its gender distinctions, is a category of creation, not of deity. The God of whom the Bible speaks is neither male nor female. In the Genesis accounts of creation, Adam and Eve reflect the divine image, but God is not in the image of either (or both). Thus *Father* conveys no sense of gender identity when used metaphorically of God. The same is true of masculine pronouns that are grammatically anaphoric, deriving their sense from the nouns they represent and being "sexless" when those words lack gender identity.

For some, however, the word *Father* is still troublesome because of negative experiences of fatherhood. The Westminster Shorter Catechism teaches us "to draw near to God with all holy reverence and confidence, as children to a father, able and ready to help us" (Q. 100). Some (women as well as men) have not had such a father, and the father they have known spoils the metaphor.

At a meeting of the Consultation on Church Union (COCU) I was engaged in a small-group discussion of God-language. A young

woman seminarian was adamant in her opposition to all male-oriented theological terminology. She shared her story of a father whose abuse of her and her mother prevented her from relating positively to the phrase *our Father*. Her preference was to address God as "Mother" because that was the parent who showed her love. In response, a seminary professor told his story of how his experience of motherhood made it equally impossible for him to relate to any female imagery of God. We found ourselves at an impasse—until someone suggested we let God define the parental metaphor through Jesus rather than let it be defined by our experience of our parents.

Theologically, that is the correct move. For in honoring his name through Jesus God reveals himself to us as One who cares about us, takes us seriously, welcomes us into his presence, and engages us in our prayers.

Spiritual Practice

Consider memorizing the Lord's Prayer if you have not already done so. Because the King James Version of the prayer remains the most common translation in use among American Protestant congregations at worship, it is recommended for memorization (see pp. 5–6). Afterward, meditate on the name that Jesus used to address God.

Questions for Reflection

Discuss the God-language issue in the light of the lesson.

In what ways is God seeking to hallow his name today?

How might we be involved in hallowing God's name?